DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 682 CS 506 581

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TITLE Is There a Sex in This Text? Gender and Value in the Rhetoric of Ethics.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; Ethics; Historiography; *Language Usage; *Rhetoric; *Sex Bias
IDENTIFIERS Axiology; Dialectical Reasoning; *Rhetorical Strategies; Rhetorical Theory

ABSTRACT

Issues of empowerment have led rhetoricians as professionals to reexamine the notion of rhetorical history and to recast what is thought to be known of the past as a collection of histories--each necessarily selective, ideologically biased, and incomplete, many potentially conflicting and all, to some degree, creative fictions. Susan Jarratt, focusing on revisionary historiography, argued for "historiography in the subjunctive mode," suggesting that the Sophists have something to teach about the value of redefinition, discontinuity, and indeterminacy in rewriting rhetorical history. James Berlin argued for plurality--a search for and recognition of ideologies in opposition to whatever dominant rhetoric emerged as "the winner" at a given historical moment. Both have shown today how the failure to recognize the contributions of marginalized groups diminished rhetoricians as a community of scholars. When the language in which rhetoricians choose to write is a source of disempowerment or exclusion they are further diminished. Once again it is hard to ignore Richard Weaver's emphasis on the "whole man" and his advocacy of "mastery." There is irony in the clear elevation of the masculine to a status of preferability in a passage about the fully human as the object of rhetoric. Such recognition helps to illuminate why it ultimately matters whether rhetoric is cast in the language of masculinity or femininity, because rhetoric is evaluative and as a consequence cannot help broadcasting its ethical basis while it has its impact on receivers. (RAE)

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Is There a Sex in This Text?

Gender and Value in the Rhetoric of Ethics

Issues of empowerment have led us as a profession to reexamine the notion of "our history" and to recast what we think we know of the past as a collection of histories--each necessarily selective, ideologically biased, and incomplete, many potentially conflicting and all, to some degree, creative fictions. A 1987 issue of Pre/Text, for example, focused on revisionary historiography. In it, Susan Jarratt argued for "historiography in the subjunctive mode" (10), suggesting that the Sophists have something to teach us about the value of redefinition, discontinuity, and indeterminacy in rewriting rhetorical history; and James Berlin argued for plurality--a search for and recognition of ideologies in opposition to whatever dominant rhetoric emerged as "the winner" at a given historical moment (55). Both Sue and Kay have shown today how our failure to recognize the contributions of marginalized groups diminishes us as a community of scholars. I would like to suggest that we are further diminished when the language in which we rhetoricians choose to write is a source of disempowerment or exclusion. I will focus, for illustration, on the exclusive language of the rhetoric of ethics in the twentieth century and will use it as a cautionary model.

I have selected ethical rhetoric in part because of the currency of many of its notions--for example, that rhetoric is practice and is therefore ethical, that rhetoric can be a powerful force for change, and that the language we use speaks louder than our intentions--in the words of Richard Weaver, that "language is sermonic." Though the terminology is different, the ethical rhetoricians' assertion that language is "value-laden" and never neutral seems closely akin to the current emphasis on language as an inherently ideological vehicle; and few

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of us would disagree with Weaver's contention that we all are prone to using terms whose "circumference" is wider than we realize ("Ultimate Terms" 111).

Modern ethical rhetoric grew out of a concern with a perceived disintegration of values in this country in the 1950's, an "axiological illness" owing to positivism, technology, and an overdependence on logic and science as the measures of all things. Rhetoric, with its classical function in determining the worthwhile and the desirable, emerged as a potential remedy (Eubanks 287). Ethical theorists shared not only the conviction that rhetoric could move humankind toward axiological health, but also a common fund of metaphors for describing our values illness. Specifically, metaphors of the feminine were used to identify and describe the illness not just of values but of modern rhetoric itself, and the solution to both problems, as these scholars saw it, lay in a strong, masculine rhetoric.

Let me underscore that in speaking of "masculine" and "feminine" metaphors in this literature, I do not wish to suggest that these qualities necessarily do, or should, belong to men or women. Rather, I use the terms to identify qualities typically and historically ascribed to one or the other sex, right or wrong. Thus qualities such as strength, potency, force, and reason constitute "masculine" labels, while weakness, passivity, reticence, and emotion constitute the feminine.

The writings of Richard Weaver may be said to have laid the foundation for twentieth-century ethical rhetoric. In one of his best-known essays, "Language is Sermonic," Weaver addressed the devaluation of rhetoric in the modern university and implied that the remedy should be sought in the literal masculinization or strengthening of faculty. Weaver wrote:

> . . . it is discouraging to survey the handling of this study in our colleges and universities. With a few honorable exceptions it is given to just about anybody who will take it. The 'inferior, unlearned, mechanical, merely instrumental members of the profession' . . . have in their keeping what was once assigned to the leaders. Beginners, part-time teachers,

> graduate students, faculty wives, and various fringe people, are now the instructional staff of an art which was once supposed to require outstanding gifts and mature experience. . . . (202-03)

Those of us on the fringe who aspire to one day acquire the "outstanding gifts" of the art of rhetoric might look for further instruction to the essay, "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric," where Weaver's prose recommends a masculine rhetoric less literally. Here Weaver discusses the "potencies" of terms or names that come to dominate a rhetoric. He suggests:

> It is best to begin boldly by asking ourselves, what is the 'god term' of the present age? By 'god term' we mean that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers. Its force imparts to the others their lesser degrees of force, and fixes the scale by which degrees of comparison are understood. (88)

In other words, it is the forceful, the dominant terms that have the most potent effect; and in describing 'god terms' here, Weaver has established a network of ethical rhetoric's own ultimate terms: "potency," "boldness," "domination," "power," and "force." Here and elsewhere Weaver even prefers the label "god terms" to the more gender-neutral "ultimate terms" of the title. These masculine god terms recur with regularity in the succeeding literature of ethical rhetoric, along with metaphors of rationality and combat.

For Ralph Eubanks and Virgil Baker, language is a woman with whom they have an ambivalent relationship. Rhetoric is a dominating woman--the "queen of the humanities" to whom rhetoricians have an "obligation," according to Eubanks ("Axiological Issues" 286), or the "mother tongue" (Eubanks and Baker 355) which can be a "dynamic force in the nurture of human values" (342). So great is this force that the authors recognize "the state of the mother tongue" as "the index of control over our destiny" (355). Yet by reading that index, Eubanks and Baker, in "Toward an Axiology of Rhetoric," conclude that "Rhetoric has a vital

relevance to the value illnesses of twentieth-century man" (342)--the predominant illness a condition they diagnose as "axiological impotence" (341).

Eubanks and Baker go on to suggest a remedy in unequivocally masculine terms. The authors express their longing to make rhetoric "a more potent power in generating 'right action'". To facilitate this, rhetoric personified is recast as the explorer, "boldly axiological, seeking out and committing itself to a sound system of civilizing values" (values of a civilization the writers have previously identified with a "manly" liberal arts tradition), thus becoming a "positive force for the amelioration of man's present condition . . ." (343). Seeking "rational guides" (344), the authors look to the "strong influence" of the Greeks (345) and appeal to the classical ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." They suggest that "the basic and sweaty burden of rhetoric is the maintenance of freedom" (346-47), and, quoting R. S. Hartman that "axiology puts the spine into democratic ideology," they conclude by reiterating that rhetoric "draws its potency" from axiology (347). Other recommendations include the perpetuation of certain "master symbols" (352) and the admonition that we must "stoutly uphold" the "philosophical quality of language" (355).

A third example comes from Richard Murphy's "Preface to an Ethic of Rhetoric." Murphy's project here is to arrive at a "code of ethics," a construction which conjures up codes of chivalry or of the military, and in fact rhetoric as combat becomes a controlling metaphor. Arguing for the integrity of the teacher of speech, Murphy suggests that in "bringing the full force of his judgment to bear" on a given proposition, the teacher may be "accused of indoctrinating respect for value"; if such is the case, Murphy argues, "let him defend himself; that is his double task." (130) Indoctrination and defense would be accompanied, on Murphy's model, by "enforcement" of a code of standards by professional speech organizations (132), similar to the codes that regulate "the forum of public affairs" where, Murphy notes, "joy in verbal conflict abounds." Murphy writes, "The British Parliament established the tradition that opposition speakers should keep at least a sword's length apart; it was safer that way. Later came rules to prevent the verbal dagger" (137).

Two aspects of the parliamentary code of ethics abide in the U.S. Senate, Murphy notes--the rule that "guarantees . . . that a Senator shall not suffer from personal attacks and indignities," and the "prohibition of offensive words" (138). In Britain, however, "Proscriptions on disorderly words have not interfered with the English love of cut and thrust in debate;" to "out-insult a member of the opposition," one must stand "at a distance of a verbal sword's length" (138). This tradition, Murphy concludes, "gives us precedent for an ethics of language"--a code clearly modeled on gentlemanly combat.

What might an alternative to these masculine rhetorics look like? An article by Robert Scott and James Klumpp in which they analyze the effectiveness of Ellen Goodman's moral argument provides an instructive contrast. Their analysis is doubly illustrative in that it illuminates how Goodman's rhetoric is effective despite a style and method historically considered "weak," and in that the authors manage a balance of masculine with feminine metaphors in their own rhetorical analysis. In "A Dear Searcher Into Comparisons: The Rhetoric of Ellen Goodman," Scott and Klumpp begin their analysis in language that echoes the ultimate terms of the ethical rhetoricians as they highlight Goodman's "mastery of comparison." They remark that columnists generally identify "strongly valued principle[s]" and enable readers to identify with groups and causes "more potent than we" (70), while "In Goodman's work, comparison serves . . . the quick thrust that may bring a smile and make an arresting opening"; such comparisons serve as "a subtle force" to "make[] the message more compelling" (72)

"Strength," "potency," and "force," however, share a balance early in the authors' praise with qualities more typically feminine; to continue the passage just cited, "comparison serves both the quick thrust that may bring a smile and make an arresting opening . . . , and the long thoughtful gaze . . . " (72)--both active/assertive and passive/contemplative functions. Goodman's columns "fuse seemingly disparate elements into unified interpretation" (72), and a rhetorical experience is "shared" by the audience (73). Of her method, the authors write:

> Goodman's use of comparison scarcely seems to fit Campbell's formula that analogy 'is more successful in silencing objections than evincing truth, and on this account may more properly be styled the defensive arms of the orator than the offensive.' What her practice does do is to show that argument at its best engages a listener or reader, making the person an active thinker, a partner in creating a reality that can be experienced. (73)

In place of metaphors of combat and force, Scott and Klumpp have launched a rhetorical analysis founded in metaphors of engagement and relationality. Their rhetoric echoes Goodman's own style, and they highlight as well her effective use of domestic metaphors--"the homely metaphor of the clothesline" (71)--as well as metaphors of weakness and dependency, as in "the motif of drug addiction that runs throughout" one exemplary column (77).

Scott and Klumpp are interested not in matters of exclusive language but in Goodman's "weak" rhetorical style--a style that by all accounts (and particularly those of the writers here cited) should not produce effective moral argument. And yet, they claim, it does; and in their own rhetorical analysis, Scott and Klumpp, whether consciously or not, eschew the heavily male-value-laden language of their predecessors. The point here is not about gender in figurative language as such, and I am not arguing for the replacement of masculine with feminine value terms. Rather, the point is about our societal values as reflected in and inculcated through the language we employ. A rhetoric of masculine privilege betrays the valuation of the partially human, while a rhetoric of masculine and feminine--particularly once it begins to pervade our language unthinkingly--bespeaks an appreciation of the person more fully realized. In the rhetoric of Scott and Klumpp and that of Goodman, we begin to see how a rhetoric on this model might look.

As though to bring a satisfying circularity to my argument, Scott and Klumpp draw a metaphor from Richard Weaver to conclude their analysis. It is the metaphor of the rhetor as minister or preacher. Weaver wrote:

> As rhetoric confronts us with choices involving values, the rhetorician is a preacher to us, noble if he tries to direct our passion toward noble ends and base if he uses our passion to confuse and degrade us. Since all utterance influences us in one or the other of these directions, it is important that the direction be the right one, and it is better if this lay preacher is a master of his art. ("Language is Sermonic" 225)

Scott and Klumpp suggest that "Goodman's is not a propositional rhetoric persuading to material truth, but a moral rhetoric seeking followers. Facing the exigencies of life, Goodman's readers seek her insight and she ministers to them. . . . We think of our clergy as both preachers--those who proclaim--and ministers--those who attend and serve" (74). What Scott and Klumpp applaud here seems a clear parallel with the blend of masculine and feminine I have already proposed. In this sense Weaver's notion of language as "sermonic" suggests a built-in remedy for the kind of rhetorical short-sightedness that would exclude the feminine, for his ideal as outlined in "Language is Sermonic" suggests as much. In it, Weaver wrote, "Just what comprises humanism is not a simple matter for analysis. Rationality is an indispensable part to be sure, yet humanity includes emotionality, or the capacity to feel and suffer, to know pleasure . . . " He continued:

> . . . the most obvious truth about rhetoric is that its object is the whole man. It presents its arguments first to the rational part of man, because rhetorical discourses, if they are honestly conceived, always have a basis in reasoning. . . . Yet it is the very characterizing feature of rhetoric that it goes beyond this and appeals to other parts of man's constitution,

> especially to his nature as a pathetic being, that is, a being feeling and suffering. (205)

Once again it is hard to ignore Weaver's emphasis on the "whole man" and his advocacy of "mastery." Of course I do not wish to suggest that Weaver should, or even could, have written any other way; he was a product of his era as surely as we are products of ours, and it would be strange indeed to find him, or anyone, writing with the kind of gender consciousness that prevails in our profession today. On the other hand, I believe there is irony in the clear elevation of the masculine to a status of preferability in a passage about the fully human as the object of rhetoric, an irony which should not go unnoticed. Such recognition helps to illuminate why it ultimately matters whether our rhetoric is cast in the language of masculinity or femininity, or both, or even something else: it is because rhetoric is evaluative and as a consequence can't help broadcasting its ethical basis while it has its impact on receivers. The ethical rhetoricians of whom I have spoken recognized this as surely as anyone. Eubanks and Baker wrote of the futility of seeking "some neutral linguistic means" for teaching language and saw in it a necessary conductor of emotion and evaluation (355); and Murphy wrote that "our judgments are conceived, articulated, and communicated not through thought alone but in a combined mental and emotional process" (141).

I must concede here my awareness that my own words, and Kay's and Sue's, are hardly objective or neutral, nor do they attempt to be. As Berlin notes, "A history of rhetoric is never innocent" (56), but the historian of rhetoric "will present her account in the service of an ideology, a statement about what exists, what is good, what is possible, and how power is to be wielded in maintaining these conceptions" (59). I have tried to present an account of how the masculine has been valorized and the feminine excluded in ethical rhetoric and to show how an alternative, more fully human model might look. In so doing, I agree, with Berlin, that "we must work to understand and judge [the past] in order to understand and judge ourselves in our own moment. We are doomed to be partial, incomplete, mistaken, yet we cannot for all this abstain from acting" (59).

It seems fitting to close with a final observation from Richard Weaver. In "Ultimate Terms," Weaver articulated both his reasons for concerning himself with the terms of our rhetoric and his advice to the student of rhetoric. He wrote:

> The machinery of propagation and inculcation is today so immense that no one avoids entirely the assimilation and use of some terms which have a downward tendency. It is especially easy to pick up a tone without realizing its trend. Perhaps the best that any of us can do is to hold a dialectic with himself to see what the wider circumferences of his terms of persuasion are. This process will not only improve the consistency of one's thinking but it will also, if the foregoing analysis is sound, prevent his becoming a creature of evil public forces and a victim of his own thoughtless rhetoric. (111-12)

I advocate, finally, the continuous holding of such a dialectic with ourselves to prevent, wherever we can, our becoming victims of our own thoughtless rhetoric. If rhetoricians of the stature of Eubanks and Baker, Murphy, and Weaver can be victimized, so much the greater must our caution be.

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